UNDER THE WAR CLOUDS IN URUMIA WEST PERSIA

1914-1919

MISSION WORK in Urumia, W. Persia, was begun in 1835 under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and in 1871 was transferred to the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. The work has been carried on successfully until the dark days of the World War, when it suddenly terminated with the deportation of the missionaries, October, 1918. At that time the lines of work were as follows:—

1. An American School for Boys with Theological Training Class.
2. Fiske Seminary for Girls with departments for Syrian, Persian and Jewish girls.
3. Twenty-nine Churches.
4. Westminster Hospital for Men and Women.
5. The Urumia Press, founded in 1839. The report for 1917 gave the total of pages printed—**151,779,368.** This was the last report received.

IT IS FEARED THAT MOST OF THIS VALUABLE PROPERTY, REPRESENTING YEARS OF MISSIONARY LABOR, HAS BEEN ENTIRELY DESTROYED.

DURING THE WAR

URING THE FIRST YEAR of the great World War (1914), Urumia was under Russian control. The report for that year states "The presence of Russian influence has lifted the cloud of terror and violence from the hearts of the villagers. The roads are now safe for the transfer of merchandise and food supplies." Then came days of terror, for on January 2, 1915, the Russian troops withdrew and the Christian population of the border districts was at the mercy of the wild Kurdish tribes. Fifteen thousand refugees took refuge behind the Stars and Stripes in the Urumia Compound, and for five months the flag flew uninterruptedly and was used of God to protect the defenseless lives back of the gateway of the compound. May 4, 1915, the Russians again took up the reins of government. From this time until the deportation of the missionaries in October, 1918, was a period of unrest. Although in a neutral country, this northwest corner of Persia saw the passing of armies and battles. The Russian troops were well disciplined, the Turkish armies and Kurdish hordes were ready for plunder and riot.

In the midst of all this disorder the Mission stood firm, and although the work was interrupted, opportunities were great for reaching the people.

February 22, 1918, marked the beginning of another reign of terror, when a great horde of Moslems and Kurds fled in terror from the nearby villages and encamped in the mission compound. A missionary wrote of this:

> The school and hospital yards were a most interesting medley. About one thousand Kurds and Moslems occupied these yards and therein each family set up village life on an abbreviated scale in his own little spot. The huge ungainly buffalo always occupied the drawing room; if there were cow or donkey members of the household, plus sheep, goats, hens, oxen and horses, these stood in what might be considered the family living room. . . . During the four months that these people were among us we made efforts to reach them spiritually in a number of ways. The largest crowds were in the camping places. Usually several songs were sung and the Scripture read, followed by prayer. Then too, some came to our houses to call and our barn people, usually over 20, came to our house to prayers as often as they were invited. . . .
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> Later, during a lull in hostilities, guards were secured from some of the villages, and the refugees were settled in them once more. A few lingered on until the final flight of the Syrian nation. (This took place the last of July, 1918.) Fighting was going on continually around us, and the hospital was filled to overflowing the first of June with about 150 wounded. The latter part of June Dr. Dodd was ill with typhoid while Dr. Packard was at the same time in the worst relapse from the same disease.

On August 1st, 1918, almost the entire population, some 80,000, of Urumia, fled in fear from the approaching Kurds and Turks.

THE DEPORTATION

THE REMAINDER of the mission force with a large number of Nestorian Christians were in the city until October, 1918, when they were driven out by the Turks. We quote from the account sent by one of the missionaries.

We were given two hours to gather up our possessions and get ready to leave. We packed what food we could in the steamer trunk while Dr. Ellis got together our clothing in a large trunk. We did not know what to take in the way of clothing for we did not know whether we were bound for a cold place or a hot climate. . . . As we passed out there stood some rough, springless wagons drawn by mules. The wagons were already piled so high that I could not see where I could possibly find a place to sit with my baby. . . . The scene we left was heartrending. Our poor Syrian folk, whom we had been protecting and hiding, clung to us, and their weeping and wailing was terrible. We were again counted for the n'th time like a lot of criminals, and then we rolled out and the wail that rose from those folk in our yard was like the wail of lost souls.

At a port on Lake Urumia we spent the first night. Sixteen persons with trunks, hand baggage, boxes of condensed milk, pots, kettles and jars of cooking grease were packed, with enough dirty Kurds and Moslems to make the total 45, into one small room. Fleas, lice and other creeping things were thick, and the other prisoners talked, laughed, spit and coughed all night. We were there three days, but were allowed after the first night to sleep out of doors. Then we were packed into the deep black hold of a barge with little air, and there, in close contact with influenza and other things, made the voyage; the deck of the barge being filled with troops and German rapid firing guns. . . . We finally reached Tabriz, and one week after our arrival were turned loose as suddenly as we had been deported, and no explanation given of any of the experiences through which we had passed. The same day that we were released, Mr. Jessup and Dr. Vanneman, of Tabriz, who had been imprisoned for 40 days in that city, were also released.

THE YEAR 1919

AFTER THE ARMISTICE, while the world rejoiced in the coming of peace, poor Persia was still under the iron heel of the oppressor. In May, Dr. and Mrs. Packard of the Urumia force returned to the city and began at once their work of relief for the suffering and sick, but it was only for a few weeks, for further disturbances rendered it necessary for them to return to Tabriz. The Mission cabled some months ago that it would need for the rehabilitation of Urumia and Tabriz—for the latter station also suffered some from the hands of the invading armies—a sum amounting to **$237,000.**

LATE NEWS FROM WEST PERSIA

IN NOVEMBER, 1918, Rev. Hugo Muller with others, started to return to Urumia. Mr. Muller wrote from Tabriz, May 18th, 1919—six months from the time he left the U. S. A., as follows:—

Our whole long trip has been full of interest and of profit, but especially interesting as we approached our own field. It was gratifying to see how well the British under General Austin were conducting the Baquba relief work, that had been well organized as to sheltering, feeding, sanitation, discipline, etc. The camp was surprisingly clean, the people showed that they were well fed and that their tent life was agreeing with them; the hospital tents were almost empty. The people were anxious to be returned to their homes, and plans were well under way for their return before the hot weather, then already beginning, should set in and prove too much for them. We were consequently disappointed a few days ago to learn that the British have postponed their plans of rehabilitation because of political conditions in Urumia.

In Hamadan we found more refugees—perhaps 2,000 or 3,000 among them a larger proportion of the better educated Syrians. The American Committee was caring for them.

All along the line to Tabriz, beggars, hungry and cold, plead for relief. There were some among them, the "professional beggar," but there were many, many, begging as a last resort and not as a fine art. Much of my travel on this road was in the rain, and by the side of the road far from a house or any semblance of shelter I frequently passed persons, with their scanty rags thoroughly drenched in the rain, holding out their skinny hand for alms—little children, one such no bigger than my own two-year-old boy, alone in the rain, and far from the nearest house; old women scantily clad and showing the terrible effects of famine; old men, lame and decrepit. My eight years in Persia have hardened me toward the professional beggar but these sights touched me. Other effects of the war, too, were not wanting—bullet holes, trenches, burned houses and half-deserted villages.

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